HIDDEN CITY

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Spelling and grammar note: the spelling in this book is mainly English standard. That is civilization not civilization; colour not color, and so on, except that the spelling and grammar correction system I used often had different ideas. Readers will simply have to put up with the horror of the occasional slip. Read on.

CHAPTER ONE

Absorbed in testing circuits on a hover car lift-crystal unit, Alf did not realise anyone else was in the workshop until a shadow fell across his workbench. He turned to see an attractive woman in perhaps her late 20s, dark hair cut short in the fashion of the time. She wore a white shirt with a gold chain at the throat and black pants that clung to her figure in a way that Alfonso, or just Alf, admired. A brown, knee-length jacket plus a few touches of makeup underscored the general air of street chic, but with a grim underlying message of a shoulder holster containing a police issue Glock nine millimetre with a laser sight, barely concealed by the jacket. Despite all the technological advances, this classic weapon remained a reliable way to blow holes in people should the user decide to do so, as Alf knew well. Another problem was that the newcomer's otherwise bright eyes regarded Alf with a potent mixture of official disdain and feminine contempt.

"This is an honour, sergeant," said Alf. turning around and getting up. Police sergeant Ellen Pullen was model-tall, but Alf still towered above her. "I didn't hear you come in. You're looking good; figure's trim. You've been working out."

"Shut up, scum," she snapped.

"Ooookay," said Alf. He nodded at the second, auburn-haired female police officer just behind the Sergeant and said, "Senior constable." That police official, Samantha Pye, was not blessed with the same cheekbones or figure as her superior but was somewhat friendlier as she nodded back and almost smiled. "If this is about stolen spare parts again, I told you the last couple of times it's really Julian who buys and sells, and I'm pretty sure he's not into anything."

"It's not about parts," snapped the Sergeant. "I have questions for the hired slime. Julian's not in? We'll use his office."

"The boss's out on a job at the spaceport," said Alf. "Even us slimy mechanics get called in to help with the orbital shuttles from time to time." He eyed the police officer's figure again as they walked to the office. "Looking good, Sergeant. You've been putting that rowing machine in the gym to good use."

Ellen rounded on Alf.

"How do you know I've been using a rowing machine? You been stalking me, you creep?"

"Not at all, sergeant," said Alf, mildly. "We use the same gym, but I mostly stay on the boxing side, so you haven't seen me. I only saw you because some of the other gentlemen in the boxing gym made – um – admiring comments about a woman using the rowing machine, and I looked for myself.

"Ha!" she said. They went into the office, where she took the padded, swivel chair, leaving Alf and the senior constable to take two chipped, plastic stacker chairs used by guests. The office's large glass window looked out onto the cavernous workshop filled with ground and hover vehicles of all types. Both sides of the office were fitted with shelves crammed with equipment, including discarded, faulty parts and a couple of testing units Alf sometimes used. The only decorations were drawings done by the boss's very young children tacked up on the back wall. He also kept a framed picture of his family on the battered desk next to the computer. The Sergeant's eyes softened when it looked at those family items before switching back to Alf at full glare.

"Would I appreciate these 'admiring comments'?" she asked.

"They were raw compliments," said Alf judiciously, "that would have to be translated from male-speak to be suitable for mixed company."

The senior constable just managed to transform an emerging giggle into a snort, earning a glare from her superior.

(In fact, the cleanest of the comments made to Alf was that the girl on the rowing machine was a "prime piece.")

"Getting back from the gym," said the Sergeant, "I've been told you've been doing work on the star freighters in orbit; you got ferried up there for two days."

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," said Alf carefully. "Is it a crime to do repair work? This business is called in for jobs at the port, as Julian will tell you."

The spaceport was, in fact, close enough for the occasional rumble of departing orbital shuttles to be heard and felt in the office. The suburb of Marshland where the workshop was located mainly existed to supply services to the port, ranging from machinery repairs to the less savory entertainments for visiting crews and the port's small garrison of Imperial auxiliaries, as well as housing many of its workers. However, those who could afford to do so lived on the other side of the port, in Creaghville proper, and pretended that Marshland and the adjacent marshes that gave the area its name did not exist.

"No crime in itself," said the Sergeant, "but when I heard about it, I took another look at the criminal record of one Alfonso Grego Martinez, a petty thief from the Sulu system."

"I'm flattered that you should take an interest in me, Sergeant," said Alf, inwardly cursing that someone had talked, although he'd asked for his involvement in the repair mission to be kept quiet.

"You don't want this sort of attention, scum," said the Sergeant. "The record of the petty thief that goes with the tracker embedded in your arm by Imperial law shows that he just scraped through school before being arrested for a series of crude smash and grabs. But I'm told you need at least a master's in space drive engineering to work on the engines of those big ships."

"What can I say, Sergeant? A man learns a lot knocking about the galaxy."

"The record also shows that you're supposed to be shorter than me, but I would barely come up to your shoulder, even in high heels."

The senior constable raised one eyebrow over that remark but remained silent.

"I guess being out on the rim made me grow in many ways, Sergeant, and you'd look really great in high heels."

"Do you seriously want to spend the night in a jail cell?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then stick to answering my questions. The listed weight is way off."

"I've been eating well," said Alf. "Those records can be inaccurate."

"The physical description doesn't match, nor does the picture." She leaned forward. "Who are you, Alfonso?"

"Just a mechanic trying to get by in this grand universe of ours."

"Right!" she snorted. "Here's the thing, Scum, I was all for dragging your arse down to the station and sweating some real answers out of you instead of the crap you've been handing me. Whoever you are, if you've taken this petty criminal's identity, your actual identity must be way worse. There's also the question of what happened to the real Alfonso. But my inspector says to just ask for now."

"Nice of him."

"He also says to say you can earn some points for yourself by keeping an ear out about this crashed ship."

"Crashed ship?"

"Sure, a big ship meant to have gone down somewhere on the other side of the marshes."

"First I've heard of it," said Alf. "They were trying to get to the port. Wouldn't port control just track the transponder?"

"It's not like that," said the Sergeant." Whoever was on the ship must be lowlifes like you. They didn't want to check in at the actual port, but they need facilities and mechanics to fix the ship."

"This is why you started asking questions around the port and checking records?"

"Why I started asking questions about your past isn't relevant, Scum," she said. "What you want to think about is your future. Help out the police on this, and we may just decide that you're not worth our time and the taxpayer's expense of a jail cell."

"I can certainly keep an ear out as you say, Sergeant," said Alf, "but it sounds wild to me. There's no place to hide a ship out there. Even a small escape pod would be picked up in any scan. Sounds almost as wild as that city that's supposed to be in the desert."

"Never mind the hidden city crap," said the Sergent.

"We've chased a few rumours on that one," said the senior constable, speaking up for the first time, "And come up with nothing. No trace on scans either."

"Let's concentrate on the crashed ship," said the Sergeant. "Here is my card with the station's number. Someone there will listen to your report and replay it to me, any time of the day or night."

"You're giving me your number, Sergeant?"

"Work number," said the Sergeant, standing up. "Use it for anything other than business, and the city has a dark, cold jail cell with your name on it."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Out on the street of downtown Marshland, Sergeant Pullen asked Senior Constable Pye if she had planted the bugs.

"Sure, one in the workshop, away from the electrical equipment, and another in the office under the desk. He was so busy looking at you he didn't notice what I did…" She giggled, "Admiring comments… Maybe we'll get something from the bugs, but otherwise, apart from learning that you're drawing attention at the gym, we didn't get much from that stop."

"Um, well." Ellen stopped to open her jacket and appraise her figure in the reflection of a glass shopfront. We learned that he noticed I'd been working out."

"Divorce finalised?" said Samatha who was a friend as well as colleague of Ellen.

"Yep."

"Going to do the dating scene?"

"Guess so, eventually," said Ellen.

"You know the talk around the girl's lockers in the station was that we should arrest Alf on the grounds that he's way more interesting a guy to question than the drunks we get from the strip clubs."

"The other girls know Alf?"

"Mostly by sight. I told them he's got personality and presence as well as looks. If you're going back on the dating scene, you could do way worse than ask Alf out, especially as he seems interested. But if you're going to date a guy, maybe calling him Scum, slime and creep is not the best way to start out."

"I call him that because I may yet have to arrest him," said Ellen, "and I don't know who he is. What's our next stop?"

CHAPTER TWO

After the police left, Julian called Alf from the spaceport to ask if anything had happened. Alfonso told him that an e-bike used for commuting, which wasn't recharging properly, had been brought in, and a gigantic diesel farm unit requiring servicing had been

dropped off, but he did not mention the police visit. Julian told him to close up at the end of the business day, which he did. Then Alf walked several blocks through the narrow streets of grey sandstone buildings to the gym, also frequented by Sergeant Ellen Pullen, where he earned a few extra credits as a sparring partner to aspiring kickboxers. Alf preferred boxing with its greater emphasis on footwork and evasion and thought that in a real fight, kicking at anything higher than the groin was asking for trouble, but kickboxing was the preferred sport in the outpost, and he had shown enough talent at it for one of the trainers to offer to coach him. Alf politely declined on the grounds that he was too old to start a career in competition.

"Too old to maybe go all the way," the trainer said. "But you don't need much training to step into a ring, and you could easily win bouts now. I even get the impression that you're holding back at times."

"Look, thanks for the offer, but I've seen too much fighting already. I can handle being a target for the fighting wannabes, but that's it." He did not mention another compelling reason – that winning a few fights might draw unwanted attention from people who would take a closer look at his identity

"Suit yourself," the trainer said. "Just keep my offer in mind."

"I'll do that."

Alf had changed into shorts and a sleeveless tee shirt and was waiting by one of the rings to be called, talking to one of the wannabes, when he was tapped on the shoulder. He turned to see a man almost as tall and a little wider than himself dressed in an ill-fitting suit with a black shirt but no tie. His head was shaven, and his face reminded Alf of a concrete wall.

"Office," said this mean-looking apparition, then he turned and left.

Alf remained where he was, talking to the wannabe, but adjusted his position so that he could see the thug return and try to grab his arm. Alf batted the man's arm away.

"Do I know you?" he said, facing the intruder squarely. The wannabe faded away. The other gym inmates stopped to watch this piece of workplace theatre.

"Office," said the man, sneeringly.

"I heard you the first time."

Alf and the thug eyed one another for a time.

"Come to the office now."

"Okay, so you want me to come to an office. Which office and why?"

The thug gestured at the boxing gym manager's office in the corner. "Mr Charles wants to see you."

Alf was being summoned to see the local crime lord.

"Really! Mr Charles wants to see me. Did he say why?"

"Come, now," said the thug angrily.

Alf thought the newcomer riled up nicely, but there was no point in riling him any further. If Mr Charles wanted to see him, he would go.

"Lead the way," he said.

The thug led the way to the office, opened the door, and stepped to one side, grinning most unpleasantly. Alf, who had dealt with thugs before, knew the man meant to push him in. Watching the thug out of the corner of his eye, he waited for the man to surge forward, then sidestepped and hauled on his assailant's arm with all his might, sticking out one leg to trip him. The thug flew through the door to land face down on the carpet, his head narrowly missing the corner of the boxing gym manager's desk. The man leaped to his feet – he was agile - and whirled, fists clenched.

"Thumper, that's enough!" barked a man sitting at the manager's desk.

"Mr Charles, I presume?" said Alf. "Sorry about that but your associate is no diplomat."

"His specialty is dispute resolution," said Mr Charles, with a slight smile. "And he's very good at it. You're lucky I've called him off."

Mr Charles had the face and demeanour of a suburban accountant, dressing in a light, grey suit and pastel tie as might be expected of such a comparatively humble but respectable post, all of which belied his reputation for ruthlessness backed by violence. Another thug stamped out of the same mould as Alf's opponent and dressed in the same way, sat to one side. The final occupant of the office, sitting in one corner, was a balding, squat, fresh-faced man dressed in a floral shirt and off-white pants and openly wearing a holster containing a police-issue handgun identical to the one carried by Sergeant Pullen.

"Alf, is it?" said the man wearing the police-issue holster as the second thug touched a button to turn the windows looking out onto the boxing area opaque. Thumper retreated to another corner to glare at Alf.

"Inspector," said Alf. He knew who the man was, although it was the first time he had spoken to him. "I had your Sergeant Pullen pay me a visit today."

"We discussed your responses to her questions and offer," said the inspector. "And now you've met Mr Charles."

"You are a man of consequence in what thriller writers would call the underworld, Mr Charles," said Alf. "I would have thought I'd be beneath your notice."

"Just a businessman, Alf," said Mr Charles, pleasantly. "Please sit." He indicated a swivel chair by the door with cracked green upholstery. "As it happens, I have a need for various people with different skills, and you may be able to make yourself some money."

"I had Sergeant Pullen ask around the spaceport," the inspector said, "looking for people who could fix starship engines and reactors who would also be discreet, and your name came up."

"Discreet?" said Alf. "The Sergeant said something about a crashed spaceship out beyond the marshes somewhere. Doesn't seem likely to me."

"Let's just say for the moment that I need your skills for a few days," said Mr Charles, "although I am curious on one point. You don't have any formal qualifications, yet I'm told you've been working on big-time technology."

"There's a loophole in the regulations," said Alf. "I can work for a qualified spaceship engineer as an assistant. There's nothing in the regs about the assistant having qualifications. The engineer is the one who signs off on the job and takes the fall if anything goes wrong."

"I see," said Mr Charles. "The word is the engineers think you know just as much as they do."

"Maybe, Mr Charles," said Alf. (In fact, the senior engineer had offered him a job and a chance to work towards his qualifications. Alf had said he would think about it.) "What concerns me now is what you'd expect me to do, how long you would want my services, and what you'd be willing to pay for those services. Is there a crashed ship?"

"If you take the job, you'll be taken to the site and shown what we want done."

"Then it's a matter of going out somewhere remote, beyond the marshes? I'm to be driven out to the site?"

"Yes, taken there."

"But what equipment is there on the site, Mr Charles? I can't just show up with a toolbox and hope to fix advanced engineering. If the system, or whatever this thing is, is down entirely, then I'll need to jack in a decent generator to reboot the software and use the diagnostics. Then it's usually a matter of ordering spare parts, and that should be interesting considering that the people who do that stuff only deal with known engineering firms."

"Hmmm, I see you know something about what you're doing," said Mr Charles. "Let's call it a preliminary scoping out then. A few days camping out in the wild so you can get an

idea of what has to be done. I'm told you're unattached, so there's no one to ask where you're going."

"That makes more sense. Yes, I'm unattached, but I still have a job and a boss who depends on my being at work. How many days are we talking about, and how much?"

"How many do you think you might need?"

"Mr Charles, how would I know," said Alf, spreading his hands. "Is this a ship? Did it crash? Is it a problem with the reactor or the drive? Is the operating system still in one piece?"

"There's no crash. The problem is that nothing seems to work. You touch a button, and nothing happens. Generators will be available."

"Hmmm, well, I'd ask for more details, but nothing beats going and looking for myself. Call it two days. It's Tuesday today, so take me out Thursday morning, and with any luck, by Friday afternoon, I'll have a plan of attack. If not, there's still the weekend."

"That's a plan," said Mr Charles. "My associates will give you pick-up details."

"As for my fee, ten thousand credits sounds good."

Mr Charles smiled slightly. "If you can fix the thing, sure."

Alf had made that offer expecting Mr Charles to bargain, but he had not.

"Half in my account tomorrow," he said. Mr Charles' expression hardened. "And if I can't do anything for you, I won't expect the other half."

"Why don't we see what you can do before throwing money at you?" said the crime lord.

"We live in a hard, cold universe, Mr Charles, where even respected businessmen can neglect agreed payments, especially as there is no way I can take you to court."

Mr Charles snorted. "Still seems rash to throw money at you. Why don't you go out to the site, and then we can agree on terms?"

"Where I'm at the mercy of your thugs, Mr Charles? With all due respect, I must insist that it's no pay, no show."

"You'll do as Mr Charles says," said Thumper.

"Oh, he's fun," said Alf, mildly, without looking at the thug.

"Not now, Thumper," said Mr Charles, waving one hand at the thug, who subsided but continued to glare at Alf. "Tell you what, I'll drop one thousand in your account tomorrow."

"Make it two."

"Fifteen hundred."

"And we'll call that my appearance money for this jaunt," said Alf after a moment's thought. "Make it three credit sticks each of five hundred left for me at the desk here by lunchtime, and I'll go. Leave instructions for the pickup with the sticks. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get back to what I was doing."

After Alf had left, Mr Charles said to the inspector: "Your sergeant, can she be squared, Evan?"

The inspector shook his head. "She's divorced and out here because she made a ruckus when she found her husband was involved in scams."

"Shame, she could have been useful. She was certainly right about one thing."

"What's that, Mr Charles?"

"Whoever that guy is, he's no petty thief from Sulu."

CHAPTER THREE

Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen returned home to her tiny, rented unit in one of the almost-presentable sections of Marshland at the end of a day of chasing down rumours about

the phantom crashed ship, changed into pee jays, and a dressing gown only to find herself, yet again, thinking of the mysterious Alf.

"Stop this," she told herself angrily. "I might yet have to arrest him I can't date him."

To distract herself, she switched the home entertainment system to a popular drama and settled down in front of the screen when the front doorbell chimed on her personal assistant. Earlier generations would have thought of the PA as a mobile phone, but it was much more than that. Ellen's PA had even advised her when it was time to divorce her now ex-husband, and she had not regretted taking that advice. She had not asked the device what it thought of Alf on the chance that it might tell her to ask him out. Not expecting anyone, she looked at the surveillance cam on her front porch to see, to her surprise, Alfonso, the man she had been trying to keep out of her mind. He was holding a piece of cardboard on his chest with a message hand-written in large letters.

"Asked to go to ship crash site," she read. "Need to talk directly to you."

After taking a moment to grab her police Glock and take the safety off, Ellen opened the door and stood there, pistol in hand, glaring at Alf.

"You were told to ring the station, Slime," she snapped, keeping her voice down. Her neighbours had been known to inquire about male visitors. "And how did you know where I live?"

"I can explain everything," said Alf, also keeping his voice down for the same reason. "Just let me in – it's kinda exposed out here – and you'll hear it all."

She thought about this for a moment, then moved well back. "Sit at the table and put your hands on it so I can see them. Do not move from the table."

"Sure," said Alf. The table in question was a small, round affair set to one side of the living room, next to a kitchen nook. A couch and chair with an entertainment unit were on the other side. A door led to bedrooms and the bathroom. It was hardly luxurious living, Alf thought, but it was clean, neat, and comfortable enough and a major step up from his single room with en-suite in a run-down apartment building.

Ellen sat on the outer side of the table, slapping her pistol, the safety still off, on the table, and then slapping her police handcuffs beside the pistol to underline her point.

Alf caught his cue.

"I only found out where you lived today when I realised I had to talk to you directly," he said quickly. "We go to the same gym, remember, and I thought your address must be on the membership files."

"You hacked the gym's system?"

"I didn't even have to do that. I went to the front desk, thinking I might slip the guy who usually sits there a few credits to take a peek while he looked the other way, making up a story about someone owing me money. But he wasn't at the desk when I went there, and the desk unit was on. Didn't take long."

"Humph! I still don't see why you couldn't have rung the station and asked to be put through to me." Ellen said.

"When I went to the gym, I was pulled into a meeting with Mr Charles and a couple of his thugs, and your inspector, Evan Bara… something. I knew him by sight, but it was the first time I'd met him."

Ellen's face fell.

"Barastoc," she said. "Shit! I thought he was clean." She banged her pistol on the table again, causing Alf concern. The safety was still off. "This crap is endless."

"As I was going out, I overheard Mr Charles ask your inspector if his sergeant could be squared, and he said you'd ended up here because you wouldn't be in some scam."

Ellen nodded. "Close enough. Alright, you came here instead of the station, even if you had to commit a minor felony to do it. I'm still listening. What did Charles say?"

"He wanted me to go out to whatever this thing is – seems it's not a crash – and look at it. I tried to get details like what was actually wrong with this piece of hardware, or even what it was, so maybe I could take along the right equipment to fix it, but no go. All he would say was that nothing worked. In the end we agreed on fifteen hundred credits up front for me to go there and see what needed to be done."

"You're an expensive petty thief," exclaimed Ellen.

"Risk must be priced accordingly, Sergeant, and I'm at real risk in this. Initially, I asked for ten thousand without specifying that it would be upfront, and Charles smiled and agreed."

"He has no intention of paying," said Ellen after a moment's thought.

"I'll be kept out there with a series of excuses until I'm judged to no longer be of any use, then killed. Charles only balked when I asked for money upfront as he'd have trouble getting it back."

"Then why go at all?"

"Too late to back out," said Alf. "I am about the only person on this rock that might be able to fix whatever it is without screaming for the cops – even if they are in his pocket - and If I refuse to go, then Mr Charles will send his thugs to kidnap me or, worse, grab someone I care about and threaten them. At the moment, that's my boss and his young family. We're not that close, but I've had dinner there a couple of times, and I couldn't let anything happen to them. If I go, well, I've been in harm's way before and lived to tell the tale."

"Why are you telling me, then?" said Ellen. "You can go out, overcome Mr Charles' goons, and claim the ship, or whatever it is, for your own."

"I doubt I'll be able to do anything with … the item, let's call it, but I was hoping that if I helped a certain rising police sergeant who would look good on news conference cameras…"

"Ha!" said Ellen.

"… locate whatever is out there, then maybe that same rising police sergeant, who in all other respects is far above me, will help me go legit so that I can take a job with one of the major engineering firms."

"Really?" said Ellen, interested in spite of herself. "You got an offer."

"Yep. An engineering firm wants to sponsor me to get qualified in spaceship engineering, and I'd like to take it."

"Humph!" she sat back and folded her arms. "Here's the thing; you see this little finger?" She showed Alf the little finger of her left hand. "I won't stir even this to help you until you tell me who you are, and no bullshit."

"I suppose that's fair enough," said Alf. "You recording this?"

She shook her head. "Wouldn't be of any use without a warrant unless I got your permission."

"Okay, well, record away if you want. My real name is Jake – Jake Christian Langston, and I was a Captain in the Forgotten Legion in the Rebellion on Martus Prime."

Ellen's mouth fell open. "What? How did you end up here?"

She had heard of the rebellion and even of the military unit, as one of the rebel units able to match the Imperial Legions but only as echoes of distant troubles. Martus Prime was a good chunk of the galaxy away from Creaghville.

"To start from the beginning, I come from one of the agricultural settlements way out on Martus itself, but I managed to win a slot at the Imperial Academy in the capital. I'd finished the basic physics degree and got into the masters of spaceship engineering course when the rebellion started."

"Then you already knew something about the advanced stuff?" said Ellen.

"Oh, sure. I knew enough to assist with repairing and adapting almost anything they could put into space in a cram course in engineering on the fly. It was a lot of fun. The Martus navy even won the first couple of battles. But then – and if I'd been older, I might have realised it was inevitable – the Imperials got organised and blew our navy to pieces. Then I was volunteered for the infantry and got altered."

Ellen's mouth fell open for the second time.

"What? But you look normal."

"I am normal for the most part – I look the same as I did before I started. But about half who underwent the treatment didn't make it at all, and half of the rest went psycho. Those of us who survived had advantages – increased mitochondrial activity and all that shit making us stronger and move faster – although just one-quarter of those who started the program got the benefits without dying or going insane."

"You agreed to try this?" exclaimed Ellen.

"No, I didn't. We were told we'd be given a few injections to protect against some Imperial bioweapon. We were all kept separate, so we didn't realise what had happened until after it was all over, and an Imperial official handed the survivors copies of the files kept on the program. We'd been given special training, diet supplements, and so on, and we thought the physical improvements were due to that. In reality, the interests behind the rebellion were desperate to find some way to counter the Imperial Legions in the land battle they knew was coming. They figured that if they could make it too costly to take the urban centres, the Imperium would come to some sort of compromise. We made a real fight of it, but in the end, the strategy didn't work."

"Quite a story," said Ellen. "What happened to you?"

"For most of those who surrendered, the proconsul took the American Civil War approach. If you handed in your weapons and swore allegiance to the Empire, you could go home, but not those who were altered. We were held on an Imperial Detention Order and subjected to all sorts of tests. I guess the Imperium was hoping to make super-soldiers of its own but without the high wastage rate.

"After a few months, I was told that if I wanted to be released, I could join the auxiliaries and fight for a time. I wound up as a sergeant in charge of a platoon stationed at a mining hell hole fighting semi-sentient worms that got their jollies from feeding on warm blooded creatures. Not fun. Don't recommend it."

"You were a sergeant in the auxiliaries as well?" said Ellen. The auxiliaries were either specialised support troops or glorified police and protection units, as distinct from the assault troops of the Imperial Legions. The Roman Empire had a similar system.

"Yep, for a time. Then the whole unit was abandoned."

"Abandoned?"

"The mining operations were shut down and I was told the unit was disbanded, all personnel discharged, but everyone was to remain on the planet until further notice."

"Okayyy… but you got out?"

"We still had our weapons, and some of the guys and girls were talking about rebelling, going rogue, all that sort of crap. I'd had enough of rebellions and, by chance, I met a freighter captain who was short an engineer. She was the sole crew on the ship when I met her – and she, well, took a fancy to me as a companion on long trips."

"Ha!" said Ellen. "You gigoloed your way out?"

"Kinda, I guess, although it's different for a guy, and I do know my way around engines."

"Where did the false identity come from?"

"I couldn't move around as Jake Langston, at least not in that quadrant. I didn't have any travel authorisation and, if intercepted, would be sent straight back. Somehow, my new

friend knew a place where identity capsules could be implanted. Once one of those is in your arm, you can pass the basic checkpoints at most spaceports. No need for any travel documents."

"What happened to the real Alf from Sulu?"

"No idea. I'm told it's possible to duplicate the capsules, or maybe he just wanted it removed so he may still be around, but I never met the man and didn't ask questions."

"You ended up here?" said Ellen.

"When we got to orbit here, we found that my captain friend's husband was in town."

"Oops!" said Ellen, amused.

"There was some quick cleaning up, and I was dropped outside of town with a few credits using an escape chute straight into the marsh, which was also not fun – icky, corrosive, and dangerous. I walked into town and started looking for work. My identity capsule was enough to get me tax status, and nobody seemed to care about anything else. I can't move off the planet, but at least here, no one wants to kill me or get me to rebel. However, I would like my old identity back, along with evidence of my basic degree and the course work I had done for my masters."

Ellen got up from the table, taking her pistol with her, grabbed a writing pad from the sideboard, and slapped it in front of Alf.

"Type out your name, rank, and unit designation both for the rebellion and in the auxiliaries; also, provide your friend's name, that of her ship, and where the identity was implanted. I'll try not to get your ex-friend in trouble," she added, seeing Alf open his mouth. "But I need to check everything. Petty thieves are skilled liars, and so is my ex-husband."

"Sure," he said.

"Assuming any of that long story checks out in the Imperial archives here, what did you want from me?"

"Part of the reason for my visit is just to tell someone I'm going and what's really happening. If I don't make it back, then you know it's because I've been killed out there, and you may be in a position to do something about it. Then there are the transcripts. If you're going to check the archives, which I can't access, it's not much extra effort to take copies of my academic and military records."

"I'll think about it," said Ellen after a pause.

"There's also the question of tracking me. I thought you could track me and get a location on this place. What's the range on my capsule?"

"We can track it for ten klicks out of town," said Ellen. "I can also send a drone to scan for it, but that involves telling my inspector what I want the drone for."

"I think I'm going way beyond ten klicks. You got any tracking devices down the station I might be able to hide in my socks, anything like that? They'll search me, but they'll be looking for weapons.

"Nothing I can check out without a good explanation. Why not try that shop two blocks beyond the gym? They've got all sorts of stuff like combat knives and security equipment."

"I know that place. Those bugs your offsider must have planted while you distracted me with your feminine wiles…."

"I did nothing of the kind, Mr Langston!" retorted Ellen, looking at the writing pad Alf had slid back to her. “That cold, dark cell is still available for those who make remarks like that."

"… while you were distracting me with your forthright questioning, I plan on leaving them in place because they won't show anything."

"How did you know we'd put them there?"

"A device in the workshop scans every two hours or so. It's an old habit of mine. Even Julian doesn't know about it. I don't suppose the devices can be repurposed for tracking?"

"They're short range," said Ellen after a moment's thought. "So, no."

"I'll be back at about this time tomorrow night, sergeant," said Alf, getting up.

"And why will you be coming back, Mr Langston?" asked Ellen sharply.

"I have to show you what arrangements I've made for tracking me, and for the moment, you should continue to call me Scum or Slime, maybe Alf, if you can't be bothered putting me down."

"Okay, Slime," said Ellen.

"Your inspector will also probably want you now to get off my case – don't agree too easily; he'll get suspicious."

"I'll just tell him you're total scum and not worth another moment of my day."

"The sad thing is he might believe you," said Alf.

He left with a wave and a half smile. Ellen put her back to the door, closed her eyes, and let her breathe out slowly. Samantha was right; the man had a presence. Later, as she was going to bed, it occurred to Ellen that if Alf/Jake's story checked out, then he might be almost datable. She pushed the thought to one side. She might yet have to arrest him.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Alf knocked lightly on Ellen's door the next day, she let him in immediately, gesturing at the table. She was fully dressed this time but without a jacket to semi-conceal the shoulder holster and pistol she wore. Alf noted that the safety was on.

"Sit only at the table," she said, stepping back. "Hands where I can see them."

"I thought we were past the 'let me see your hands' stage," said Alf.

"You're scum until I say otherwise," Ellen said. She took a folder off the sideboard and slapped it on the table. Despite all the advances in technology, paper still had advantages.

"Amazingly, your story checks out. Jake Christian Langston rose through the ranks to become a captain and commanding officer of the tenth independent combat group in the Forgotten Legion. This time, the picture and physical description on file match you. How many people are in those combat commands?"

"Nominal strength was about three hundred, but it was usually closer to two hundred and fifty," said Alf. "As well as grunts with guns, we had medical, comms, heavy support weapons, and makeshift transport so that we could, in theory at least, fight on our own for long periods and even run away convincingly in the transport – hence the independent bit of the title."

He looked at the printouts. "Ahhhh yes! And my Academy transcript. That saves me a lot of trouble. Thank you for that."

"You're still scum," said Ellen. "Even if you took two wounds and earned two bravery commendations plus another note of approval in your file from your time in the auxiliaries."

"I did?" said Alf. He flicked through to his auxiliary record. "So, I did; that miserable Imperial Legion captain said I ran my unit well. I always thought he disapproved of me as rebel scum. This also says I've been discharged."

"The archives say your unit was disbanded and all members discharged. No outstanding warrants on your name or that of Alfonso. But I can still get you on entering the colony illegally, using a false identity, and messing with the gym's membership system."

In fact, Ellen had been impressed by Jake/Alf's academic and military record and was interested that no criminal matter of any consequence hung over him. Even the identity chop shop that Alf/Jake had used seemed to have been shut down in a police action. The offenses of illegal entry and using a fake identity could be glossed over by a colony that wanted to

attract skilled people, not throw them in jail. But she was not about to acknowledge any of that.

"Don't sound so disappointed," said Alf. "Can I keep this folder?"

"I included a digital dot, but sure. As for getting your identity back if we can shed some more light on the activities of Mr Charles, then I may lift my other little finger to help on that count."

"Here's where I'm supposed to meet the transport." Alf handed over a note. "It's early morning."

"Not far from here," said Ellen, looking at it. "On the edge of town. You'll be in their hands."

"They won't kill me yet. They need me to look at whatever is out there, and I'll give you this." He put a small device about the same size as a business card, albeit somewhat thicker and heavier, on the table and slid it across to Ellen.

"What this?"

"I don't dare ask for your number, so here is the twin of a tracking device I bought at that shop." Alf also had bought a small knife he could conceal in his boot, but he was not about to admit to that. "I'll get the other past the inevitable searches. The tracking data will show on your device, as well as text messages and images, and you can send the material to your other devices. You'll see I'm listed as scum in the contacts."

Ellen smiled slightly despite herself.

"You're beginning to understand your importance in this colony," she said. "That's good."

"As for the rest, we'll have to wing it, and I'd best go before your neighbours start wondering why that strange man they saw come in is staying so long. Keep an eye on the device."

"I will, although you're still scum."

"Now I know all the right people despise me," said Alf, standing up.

He was at the door before she could say anything – she had previously debated whether to offer coffee but eventually decided it would be a bad idea – and had closed the door before she could say "take care" softly.

Early the next morning, Alf arrived at the pickup point – a dusty intersection on the edge of Marshland - to find two others, a man and a woman of about undergraduate age, dressed as if they had just come from lectures. They also carried packs with clothes and night gear as they had all been instructed.

"Who are you?" asked the male, a slight, bespectacled youth.

"Alf, an engineer – waiting for Mr Charles' men." Alf may have revealed his true identity to Ellen, but he would call himself Alfonso for now as that was the name Mr Charles' thugs knew him by.

"Oh, okay," said the youth. "Brian, computer science. Also waiting for them."

They shook hands.

"Elsbeth," said the girl, an intense looking person with lank, blonde hair framing a narrow face. "Linguistics."

"Linguistics?" asked Alf. "How come we need a linguist?"

Elbereth shrugged. "They're paying me good money to come, and a PhD in linguistics is not a money spinner in this colony."

"Guess not," said Alf.

Before they could talk further, the pickup vehicle arrived – a semi-automated furniture van with all signage and emblems on the worn-looking canopy painted over. The van pulled up in front of them without ceremony and disgorged three of Mr Charles' thugs,

including Alf's old friend Thumper, grinning evilly. Alf allowed himself to be grabbed by this thug and thrown into the back of the van, where benches had been installed. Brian and Elbereth were flung in beside him, protesting. Alf had time to note that the front half of the van was filled with boxes and assorted equipment, including what seemed to be a large diesel generator, before Thumper turned him around and pushed him face first against the wall.

"Hands against the wall, scum," he said.

Alf thought it was much nicer when Ellen called him scum. Thumper searched him briefly, taking his phone assistant but missing the tracking device Alf had taped to his chest, then cuffed the engineer's hands behind his back with electronic restraints, slammed him down on the bench, and dropped a hood over his head. Alf could hear the other two protesting as they got the same treatment.

Some distance off, concealed in some stunted trees, Ellen was watching this byplay through her standard-issue police electronic binoculars with concern. All three persons had been waiting calmly, so why treat them like that? She looked at the tracking device Alf had given her. There had been a signal just before. Now, there was none. The van canopy might be metallic. Would that block the signal? Ellen did not know. She could at least run the van's number plates and try to identify the thugs from the video recordings made automatically by her binoculars. Even in the far reaches of the galaxy, police work followed certain procedures.

In the back of the van, Thumper was gloating.

"Now we'll see who's the tough guy," he said as the van drove off.

Alf supposed the remark was directed at him.

"You two go and sit in the driver's cabin," Thumper snarled.

"Mr Charles said not to leave you alone with our consultants," said one of the thugs. "Especially after what happened with the last one."

"Last one?" thought Alf.

"He's not here; I am," said Thumper. "Don't worry, I won't damage 'em. Maybe warm up Alf a bit."

"The big 'un?" said the other thug.

"Yeah, he outsmarted Thumper in front of Mr Charles a couple of days back," said the first thug. "Now he wants pay back."

"No one outsmarted anyone else," said Thumper, "but Alf here wants some learning." He lashed out, thumping Alf on the side of the head, knocking him into Brian.

"We didn't sign up for this," squawked Brian from inside his hood. "Why do this?"

"Why handcuff us?" Elsbeth said indignantly, her voice also muffled by a hood. "We're not going to do anything."

"Shuddup!" snarled Thumper. "No noise, and I might forget you exist. Get lost, you two."

The last command was apparently addressed to the two thugs, who, as far as Alf could judge from the noise, moved off to the driver's cabin through a sliding door. The vehicle was self-driving, but even with all the advances in AI, it was still a good idea to have a human upfront.

"Now we can have a few words," said Thumper in a nasty voice after a few moments.

"Is this the part where we bond?" asked Alf. His reward was another smashing blow, knocking him into Brian, who, in turn, fell into Elsbeth. Both youths fell to the floor, squawking.

Alf thought that this had to stop before someone got hurt.

"You know what I hate," Thumper said, grabbing the front of Alf's tee-shirt in his left hand. "It's smart arses."

Alf pulled away from him, forcing Thumper to pull harder while at the same time crouching down, half off the bench with his legs coiled underneath him. He could not see Thumper but as the thug was trying to pull him up, he thought he knew about where his face would be. Alf lowered his head and sprang forward with all the strength of his legs, his body a battering ram. His covered head connected with Thumper's face, driving it hard and smashing the back of the thug's skull into the side of the van. He head-butted Thumper twice more, using his legs and body as a powerful hammer. Alf stood back and shook his hood off as his opponent slid to the floor, unconscious, face covered in blood.

The two youths were whimpering.

"What's going on?" squeaked Elsbeth.

The sliding door from the driver's cabin jerked twice, then the thug inside banged on it.

"Thumper, open up!" yelled the thug. "What are you doing to the consultants?"

Thumper had locked the sliding door and there was no window.

"They're all fine," said Alf in what he hoped was a passable imitation of Thumper's snarl. "Tell us when we're close."

Alf's snarl was sufficiently convincing to make the thug in the driver's cabin stop rattling the door. The soldier searched the unconscious Thumper's pockets for the electronic key and then, after some fiddling, managed to insert the card in his cuff. He knew about electronic handcuffs from his time in an Imperial prison. Once freed, he grabbed Thumper and flung him so that his face connected with the edge of a container in the heap of goods on the far side of the van. After some thought, Alf used his hood to wipe the blood off Thumper's face – not because he cared about the thug at all but to disguise the fact that his hood had blood on it - then freed the other two.

"What happened to that guy?" said Elsbeth, going up to Thumper. "There's blood!"

"Think he tripped while belting me, with you two as collateral damage. He went quiet for a while, so I shook off my hood and found him like that. Then I got the key." Alf knew his story would not hold up for a moment under careful examination, but he didn't think anyone would care enough to ask questions.

"You know how those cuffs work?" asked Brian.

"Just to get off and on. I've had a varied career."

"Shouldn't we do something for him?" said Elsbeth.

"Why?" asked Alf. "To remind you of very recent events, that guy cuffed you, stuck your head in a sack, and was thumping you – albeit indirectly. I was getting it directly, which was no fun. He's still alive, which is a shame, and seems to be breathing strongly enough, so leave him."

Elsbeth shrugged and sat down again.

"Now we can talk about how we came here," said Alf.

The two youths were students at the local university who had answered an online ad about work that paid well but had to be kept confidential. Brian had a knack for hacking, or so he said. Elsbeth's inclinations had led her to study language structures and, eventually, to big-picture ideas about the nature of languages. She had been told her skills might be put to good use.

"Do you speak any other languages?" asked Alf.

"Some French."

"Were either of you told anything about a crashed spaceship?"

They both shook their heads, obviously surprised.

"Is that what you were told?" said Brian.

"I know something about phase drive systems and ship reactors, but I can't see what a crashed ship would be doing beyond the marshlands or why it wouldn't be a total wreck they could claim as salvage."

"Guess we'll know soon enough," said Elsbeth.

They talked about how much they were being paid. Both had been promised thousands of credits, but neither had thought to ask for any of the money upfront. Alf was tempted to tell his new colleagues that he suspected they had stuck their heads in a noose. But then thought that they might panic, and that might cause problems. Privately, he vowed to keep them alive if he possibly could.

Eventually, the van turned off the sealed road onto a desert track. The marsh just behind the suburb of Marshland was watered by streams from distant mountains, but otherwise, the area got little rain, meaning that it was hot, waterless, and unattractive scrub. After a few minutes, the road started rising, and they climbed to a plateau, so that at least it was cooler than on the Creaghville plain, but the country remained barren and largely featureless.

After another half an hour of bouncing around on the dirt track, the truck stopped. Alf pushed the back doors open and stepped out into a large area covered by some form of plastic sheeting supported by metal poles. There were several tents in this area – self-erecting affairs bought from sports stores, or so Alf suspected – two cars and more equipment in piles. At one end was a gate with at least one guard that Alf could see. At the other was an excavation set into the side of a hill, protected by a wire security fence.

One of the thugs from the van appeared, relieved to find the "consultants" had been released and were unharmed.

"Where did Thumper go?" he asked.

"Still in the back," said Alf, jerking his thumb at the van. "Whatever's behind that fence might be what we were called here to investigate," he said to the others. "Let's take a look."

They threw their packs beside one of the tents – Alf taking a moment to palm the tracking device from the sheath strapped to his chest and slip it into one of the pockets – and walked towards the fence. The thug came back.

"What the fuck happened to Thumper?" he asked.

"Seems to have tripped or something," said Alf over his shoulder. "He was thumping me and knocking me into the others; then he was quiet for a while. I shook off my hood, and he was like that."

"Yeah?" said the thug. "He's taken a hell of a knock."

"Look closely," said Alf, turning to face the thug. "Do we care? You guys cuffed us, put hoods on us, and he started belting me. We didn't sign on for any of that."

"Yeah, we didn't," said Elsbeth. "That guy terrified me."

"I checked he was still breathing and left him," said Alf. "I was going to open the back door and kick him out but then thought that someone might miss him."

"He won't be too happy when he wakes up," said the thug.

"Uh huh!" said Alf, turning away. "Maybe you can get Mr Charles to open a hospital wing for him."

The fence had a gate that was not locked and a sign that said, 'Authorised Personnel Only', which they ignored.

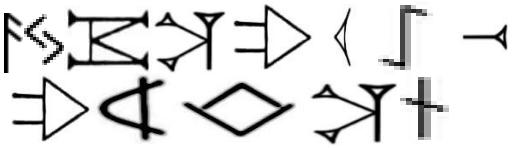
"Who's Mr Charles," asked Brian as they opened the gate.

"The gangster boss running this whole thing," said Alf. "Those guys work for him. Thumper's one of his chief enforcers. You didn't meet him before coming here?"

"No, I just had an interview with a woman at a recruitment agency," said Brian. "No one said anything about gangsters to me."

"Nor me," said Elsbeth.

Beyond was a metallic ramp that led down to the bottom of a pit. On the far side of that pit, hidden underneath an overhang, was a metal hatch. Much shorter and somewhat narrower than the hatches Alf was used to, the hatch was inset into a white, concrete-like wall. It had a security lock with a keypad set in the concrete on one side, but the symbols on the keypad writing on the door were entirely unfamiliar.



"Looks like a cross between cuneiform and Anglo-Saxon runes," said Elsbeth.

Several more words in the same script were stamped on the hatch, with another single symbol set above it to the right.

"This no ship," said Alf. "And it's alien."

CHAPTER FIVE

On his way out to lunch, Inspector Evan Barastoc stopped at Detective Sergeant Ellen Pullen's desk.

"Sent you a couple of items," he said. "How's the domestic assault going?"

"Interviewed everyone," said Ellen. After some debate with herself, she had decided not to say anything to Barastoc about his being in league with the local gangster for now. The last time she kicked up a fuss about corruption, she ended up divorced in the Marshlands stations, albeit with a promotion to sergeant. She would bide her time. "Got the hospital reports. Just compiling the evidence brief now."

"All good, but the brief won't be wanted for a few days. You can check out that other stuff."

Ellen had been pulled off her inquiries at the spaceport the day after Alf appeared at her door and given a string of investigations, the juiciest of which had been the domestic assault against a sex worker by the girl's partner. The girl had been left for dead, and the man, a total pig, had been amazed that the police cared enough to investigate, and so enraged that a female detective was leading the investigation that he had blurted out admissions in the interrogation. This sort of investigation made a difference, but Ellen also knew that it had been thrown at her to keep her busy so that she would not check again on Alf.

"Beaten up guy in hospital," she said, reading the first item on her screen. "Could be anything."

"Hospital thought enough of it to pass on an alert. It's not a gunshot wound, so we're not obliged to do anything but go and talk to the man. See if he has anything to say for himself."

"Okay!" Ellen looked at the next item. "Dognapping?"

Barastoc shrugged. "The perpetrators of this crime are asking for two thousand credits for the return of… what was the animal's name?"

"Poppy. A cocker spaniel cross."

"There you are, a much-loved member of the family has gone missing," said Barastoc, "and two thousand credits is enough for us to pay attention."

The inspector wandered off, and Ellen checked the tracking device Alf had given her. The signal had vanished for a couple of hours after Alf had been thrown in the van but had